



PHOTO: LAURA WILLIAMSON

[HUMANS]

How to dance on a liquid spaceship

At the bottom of the world.

AOTEAROA IS FULL OF TOWNS WITH QUIRK, AND THOSE WHICH HAVE SPROUTED UP NEXT TO THE GREAT SURF SPOTS HAVE THEIR OWN PARTICULAR CHARACTER. WELL-SUNNED LOCALS WITH ONE EYE ON THE WEATHER, THE SCENT OF WET WETSUITS AND WAX, A GENEROUS RATIO OF ARTISANS TO OTHERS: THEY DOT THE COUNTRY'S COASTLINES. SOME FACE WEST, SOME FACE EAST, WHILE AT THE VERY BOTTOM OF TE WAI POUNAMU, RIVERTON / APARIMA POINTS DUE SOUTH.

Pressed hard against the open water of Foveaux Strait, Riverton sits 30 kilometres west of Invercargill on the Aparima River estuary. The population of about 1500 includes artists, fishers, a growing number of Queenstown weekenders, and a community of wave-loving waterfolk, drawn by a range of surf breaks, from Colac Bay and Porridge to the famously long, beginner-friendly Mitchell's Bay. They come in spite of waters that have a reputation for being cold and sharky, and weather that bites - the

macrocarpa trees bent on a permanent inland lean speak to the strength of the southerly when it howls through.

Marama Pou thinks Riverton is the friendliest place to surf in the country (I'm pretty sure she's talking about the people, and not the sharks). "Everyone here's hospitable," Marama says. "Most people don't fight for waves, they share a wave, and if they don't, there's something wrong with them."

Marama, who first got her feet on a board at age two, is part of one of the original surfing families of Riverton. Her father, Puke, taught her and her three siblings, and when Marama was 17, her mum Yvonne decided enough was enough with watching from the beach, and learnt herself.

At 39, Marama rips, unsurprisingly. She's represented Otago Southland, spent time on the New Zealand Reserve Team and still competes on the South Island Circuit. She's as humble as they come, though, sharing

openly and laughing easily. "I wouldn't say I'm an expert, I've just got a lot of surfing years behind me. It makes me happy." While that's probably always been the case, it was when she was in her mid-thirties that surfing really changed her life.

"Four years ago I had a stroke, and my whole right side was paralyzed. I was only 35 at the time - fit, healthy, young, no reason to have a stroke." But a hole in her heart had other plans. "I had to learn how to walk, talk, and do everything again. I wasn't allowed to drive, I couldn't do anything. It was massive for me." Marama says surfing played a huge role in her recovery, helping her to regain coordination and confidence. "I was scared to go anywhere by myself or do anything, and surfing was the one thing that made me feel good all the time. So I just made myself do it, and started to realise that I actually still could."

"That was a life changer. The things that used to matter to me don't matter anymore, and I've realised you can't take the simple things for

“if humiliation is a given, so is the buzz”



granted.” For Marama today, the joy is in getting other people inspired and out there, even when it’s freeze-your-tits-off cold. She is now the Southland ambassador for the Aotearoa Women’s Surfing Association.

The surfing world has typically been male-dominated, but that’s changing fast. “Growing up, there were maybe two other female surfers in the water,” she says. “Now, locally there’s probably about twenty or thirty women who surf, when before it was just me and my mum and my sister. Everybody supports each other, which is cool because I didn’t have that growing up.”

She talks about surfing with reverence. For Marama, it wipes the slate clean. “I feel free when I’m in the water. I don’t think about anything or whatever I was grumpy about disappears.”

Learning to surf can be both joyous and incredibly frustrating, with a curve as steep as they come. Getting good enough to catch unbroken waves and not just eat shit in the whitewater (though that is its own kind of cleansing joy) – there’s no real way to do it with dignity. It’s a big slice of humble pie, served up again and again with saltwater splutters, boards-to-the-head and spectacular nosesdives.

“he whipped his kit off and surfed naked under the stars”

Still, if humiliation is a given, so is the buzz, whether you’re getting barrelled or playing in two-footers on a foamie. It’s exhilarating, absorbing, addictive, a blend of terror and joy. In Hawaii, He’e Nalu, the ancient art of wave sliding, has its roots in play, social bonding, competition, spiritual practice and a Tinder-free way to find a hook-up. It was once such an important part of the culture that work was forbidden for three months over winter, prime surf season.

Colonialism muted but did not quash the pastime, which was later revived through the legendary Hawaiian Duke Kahanamoku and other ambassadors. In Aotearoa, the sport’s second wave was spurred by a visit from Duke himself in 1915, and, later, Californians Rick Stoner and Bing Copeland. Today spots like Gisborne, Raglan and Piha are firmly on the map as world-class surf destinations, with the crowds to match.

Riverton, while certainly attracting more curious wave-seekers, seems to have dodged an influx of the masses and the tension that can bring to the swell. Marama, who has surfed all over Aotearoa, also attributes the lack of aggression in the Southland line-ups to a surf culture that is unlike anywhere else in the country.

“It’s the people that make that culture.” She says people who come from outside to surf tend to leave happy. “I’m like, come and surf with me and check out my cool town. You’re inviting them to try something different.” And the sharks? Marama suspects the reputation is more about a fear of the unknown. “There are some big seven-gillers around at Porridge, and the odd Great White has been spotted, but not really at the beach breaks.” She’s been bumped but not attacked, and reckons if you’re scared it only makes the situation worse. “If you have a great respect for the ocean, you’ll be respected in return.” Spoken like a true local.

Just up the road, board shaper Wayne Hill is as much a part of the fabric of Riverton as the waves themselves. Born and raised across the road from Mitchell’s Bay, Wayne is an artist of endless modalities. He’s around the corner from the Pou family, and grew up surfing with Puke.



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MARAMA (LEFT) IN HER ELEMENT. PHOTO: BELEN RADA

“Most people don’t fight for waves, they share a wave”

WAYNE’S WORLD. PHOTO: GEORGIA MERTON





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THE LEGENDARY BREAK THAT IS PORRIDGE. PHOTO: SUPPLIED

When I visit, he's putting the finishing touches on his lockdown project: a home-made boathouse, nestled in the foliage in front of his main abode. A die-hard recycler and proudly low-budget builder, Wayne dragged an abandoned boat hull home from Invercargill's Oreti Surf Lifesaving Club, and it quickly became the roof for his new home-away-from-home in the backyard. The Vikings, who hunkered under their upturned boats on the beach before attacking the enemy, were the inspiration.

Wayne, whose generous moustache barely disguises his grin, has been dabbling in some form of the arts since he can remember, and his home is an overflowing tribute to this. "Everything is my studio," he says, apologising for his madness.

If it is madness, it's the best variety. Surfboards of every shape and colour fill the rafters and line the walls, and where they don't, photographs and paintings abound. The smell of resin drifts in from his shaping workshop, and the rooms are spilling over with sculptures and installations. There's even a Covid face mask fitted with a rubber glove that expands on every exhale; Wayne wore to the bank in Invercargill for some comic relief in serious times. Aside from building surfboards, which he dubs "wavedancers" or "liquid spaceships", Wayne also runs the local poetry night, draws, paints, sculpts and has done his time as chairman of the Riverton Community Arts Centre.

His board shaping kicked off about forty years ago, when an older fellow artist, a potter and a painter, showed him the basics. "As soon as I built my first one, I was hooked. So I just started building them and finding out my own ways of doing them - stumbling, falling, learning, getting to understand different parts of the board. Learning about the rocker, the rails and fin configuration." Soon enough, Wayne started experimenting with fins made from Paua shells, his trademark.

For Wayne, surfing and creative expression go hand in hand. "When I've got a little issue with a painting or a sculpture I'll leave it on shore, and head out and get a few waves. I'll be sitting out there, watching a cloud or something and then suddenly realise what I need to do." His work

isn't always unanimously well-received, though. "For about six years I was getting in a lot of trouble for making driftwood sculptures and putting them in the estuary overnight," he says with more than a hint of pride.

Riverton, for Wayne, can't be beaten. He's surfed all over the world, but coming back to his place across the road from where, back in the forties, returned vets supposedly built wooden surfboards, brings him to tears. He does long a bit for the "good old days" when it was all peace and love and he'd be the only one at Porridge in perfect conditions. But he still manages to get waves to himself thanks to the occasional full moon. In fact, one such session recently gave him such solitude, he whipped his kit off and surfed naked under the stars. "It was such a warm night in summertime. Nobody around, no wetsuit - why the hell not? Next thing I'm howling at the moon, riding along on these dark black ribbons with dancing silver behind me."

Wayne's not the only one. Marama confesses to a nudie session with some of the ladies at Colac Bay, and I start to draw the conclusion that either there's something very good in the water, or living in Southland keeps one young at heart. It certainly, according to both, raises hardy surfers.

"There are times over the years that there's been snow on the beach," Wayne says. "When a winter squall comes through with massive hail, we're in the water with our boards over our heads, our fingers being pummelled. It passes, and you jump back on your board and catch a wave." Marama, meanwhile, wears her 3/2mm wetty all winter, no hood, no booties. For anyone who doesn't speak surf, that's a thin wetsuit and fair bit of bare skin for some pretty icy seas.

Yes, they make them tough and friendly down in Riverton. It's all about sharing the stoke. So, for the most welcoming session in the country, head on down. Nosedives, newbies, nudity, welcome.

GEORGIA MERTON